

PORTRAIT OF A DEDICATED WOMAN

HENDRINA STENMANN

Co-Foundress of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit



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Mechtilde Berger SSps

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Foreword

When we look back and remember people who lived before us, persons who were loved by others and whose life interests us, we would like to know what they looked like and how they changed. We want as complete an idea of them as possible.

Hendrina Stenmanns, known to the Missionary Sisters of Steyl and in her home town of Issum as Mother Josepha, was described by Arnold Janssen after her death as “co-foundress” and “our good Mother”. That is how she is known in the religious family of Steyl, in her home town and among the many who love and venerate her.

The first part of the following compilation is a survey of the photos we have of M. Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns. In these photos we can detect a development.

Later decades produced portraits, paintings and various kinds of representation. Some of the pictures are not so easy to understand, and not every picture will appeal immediately to everyone. At times it is not so much the type of picture that speaks, rather the representation takes its character from the location, or from the material used.

Photos and representations found in the Motherhouse in Steyl, in the pilgrimage town of Kevelaer and in the home town of Issum are described and interpreted in the following for those who are interested.

Biographical Sketch of Hendrina Stenmanns

*H*endrina Stenmanns was born in Issum, in the German Lower Rhineland, in 1852, the eldest of seven brothers and sisters. At a young age she developed a compassionate heart and helping hand for the poor and needy, the sick and the dying. Diverse factors in the contemporary situation prevented her from realizing her wish to become a Franciscan nun, so she joined the Franciscan lay movement and led a spiritual life in the midst of an ordinary daily life. From her modest means she gave aid wherever she could and is, therefore, still known in Issum today as “a great benefactress of her home village”.

Contact with an apprentice of her father who wanted to become a missionary in Steyl, in the Netherlands, kindled the missionary fire in her own heart. In 1884 she also made her way to Steyl. At first she worked with other women as a maid in the young Mission House that Arnold Janssen had established in 1875. It took him until 1889 before he finally decided to found the present day Mission Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit. She was given the religious name Josepha. Together with M. Maria, Helena Stollenwerk, she became a cornerstone of the young community of sisters. Her practical nature and talent for organization were put to good use in the management of the constantly growing household. Above all she was a gifted educator; she had an inherent ability to introduce young women to the religious life with great sensitivity. Sisters and guests alike encountered in her a warm heart, friendliness, availability and kindness. In 1898, following the transfer of M. Maria to the Adoration Branch, she became superior. The sisters loved, esteemed and revered her. M. Josepha kept up correspondence with sisters who had been sent to various foreign countries. Nothing was too small or too insignificant to her. That is why all felt accepted, secure and understood by her. Towards the end of 1902 her long and painful final illness began, leading to her death on May 20, 1903. The process for her beatification began in 1950.

The Photos

There are just three photos of M. Josepha. The best known photo has been most widely propagated and has served as a model for other images. A fourth photo was taken as she lay in state after death.

Unfortunately there is no photo of her as a young woman before she entered in Steyl. We do know, however, that she was rather short and dressed very simply. In memories of the early years in Steyl we read about her long, blond hair.

In 1895 Sister Andrea Hegemann, a companion of M. Josepha from the first years, left for Argentina with three other sisters. A photo was taken of the departing group. For decades that custom continued for each group of sisters leaving for the missions but otherwise in Steyl photos of sisters were something of a rarity.

Young women wanting to become missionary sisters applied early on in Argentina and they soon began to ask: Who are the “reverend” superiors and the first sisters in Steyl? What do they look like? So the request for a photo was sent to Steyl.

The three remaining eldest Missionary Sisters: Sister Superior Maria, Helena Stollenwerk, Sister Assistant Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns, and Sister Anna, Theresia Sicke, were photographed as a group. The words “the eldest Missionary Sisters” can still be read on the edge of the original photographic plates. Two exposures were made with the sisters remaining in the same order: on the left Helena Stollenwerk, later M. Maria, on the right Hendrina Stenmanns, later M. Josepha, and in the centre, behind the small table, Theresia Sicke, later M. Anna.

M. Maria is holding a slim book, M. Josepha’s hands are folded around the rosary, M. Anna also has a rosary in her left hand while her right hand rests on two books on the table; in the second photo M. Maria and M. Josepha are unchanged but M. Anna is holding a photograph with both hands. At the time M. Maria and M. Josepha were forty-five years old.



The photos clearly show that the sisters were not exactly prepared. Probably they had to change their dresses for it in a hurry. On close inspection we see that their clothing is a trifle dishevelled. In the first photo, M. Josepha and M. Anna look very serious and slightly scared.



In the second photo they both look more friendly. The familiar photos of M. Maria and M. Josepha were taken from this picture.

Arnold Janssen later accorded both M. Maria and M. Josepha the title of co-foundress. To obtain a photo of just these two, the second photo of the group of three was reworked: The third person, M. Anna, was blotted out. To fill out the space, a crucifix was set on the table. This picture, in various sizes, was given a place of honour in the individual communities.



The final profession of the first nine sisters on 8 September 1901 was an important milestone in the history of the young Congregation. Consequently a photo was taken of the group. M. Josepha, as superior, was seated in the middle of the front row.

M. Josepha gave her married sister in Issum a copy of the photo. From that time on the photo has graced the wall of her parental home, the home of the Verheyen Family in Issum, Nordring 170.



When the final profession photograph was taken, M. Josepha was 49 years old, thus only four years older than when the first photos were taken. In those few years her appearance had changed, as an individual photo clearly shows. She was marked by the burden and responsibility of her office, by early aging and by the first signs of the illnesses that were to become clearer later on: rheumatism, frequent bronchitis, asthma and edema.



It is worth taking a moment to study the photos: first allowing the whole photo to speak to us, then just to look at the eyes, the lower part of the face and finally each side of the face separately.

M. Josepha is looking directly at us, knowingly, understanding and at the same time extremely loving and kind. There is clarity and broadness of vision. She has a distinctive facial expression: staunch, resolute, firm, decisive. Her gentle smile invites us to approach her.

M. Josepha's large, strong hands are noticeable. They give eloquent testimony of many years of hard work. Here they are folded in prayer, as so often in her life that was completely anchored in God.

Descriptions in Letters and Memoirs

It is well known that M. Josepha was small. In fact she was so small, she was afraid she would not be admitted to a convent. The vivid descriptions give the impression that she went her way quickly, efficiently and brightly, with a keen eye, accomplishing her tasks and work in a practical manner.

In M. Anna's memories of M. Josepha we read about Hendrina's long, blond hair that during their work in the kitchen naturally had to be tucked up under a headscarf, and later under the veil. Over the years M. Josepha became very well aware of the changes in her own person and in others. In October 1897 – M. Josepha was 45 plus – she wrote to Sr. Andrea in Argentina with sympathetic understanding: "Do you also feel ... that you are already growing older? Have the worries also caused your hair to turn grey? Sr. Superior (Maria), Sr. Anna and I have already aged quite a bit," i.e. M. Josepha's hair had also turned grey in the meantime.

Sr. Andrea remembered the early years in Steyl: "M. Josepha's clothes were always clean and she greatly disliked it if her clothing was not totally clean and in order." Sr. Andrea added: "That lets you conclude that she also had a beautiful and pure soul... She had a friendly and pleasant character and was almost always cheerful. A pleasant smile lit up her face, especially when she met someone." Another sister said: "You could meet M. Josepha anywhere and everywhere, she always gave you a smile."

Sr. Alacoque Berenz, a trained artist among the first generation sisters and thus very observant, described M. Josepha's appearance: "Figure: Medium height, upper torso bent forward, in later years walk rather shuffling. Physiognomy: Clear-cut features radiating kindness and firmness. Her blue-grey eyes betrayed prudence and goodness. M. Josepha had no academic education, nor what one would call social

polish. But something that is worth incomparably more and that no studies can replace: inborn tact, great prudence, and clear, competent judgment. Her external appearance expressed so much serenity and peace. Sr. Alacoque saw the reason for that in her closeness to God. And she continued: “After being with her for some time, it was not difficult to distinguish in M. Josepha three striking qualities that gave her entire manner a unique character:

1. Humility
2. Kindness
3. and Maturity.”

Sr. Solana Ebels: “With regard to M. Josepha’s external appearance: she was of medium height and matronly, loving, friendly, uncomplicated and modest; she had a mature character and clear perception, solid virtue and a noble heart.... She spoke only briefly but her words were full of fervour.”

Many of the memoirs speak of M. Josepha’s kind and friendly facial expression. The experience of M. Josepha’s look of profound kindness remained the strongest impression in the sisters’ memories. A few sisters also spoke of a serious, strict expression when she admonished someone, but it was a look that never hurt because it came from M. Josepha’s natural authority. In the same way she could look sadly at a sister when she was disappointed by the sister’s actions. One look from M. Josepha was more effective than any admonition.

Illness and Death

The photograph taken at the final profession in September 1901 clearly shows that M. Josepha had become stout; that probably accounts for her rather shuffling walk (as Sr. Alacoque described it). In her final illness in 1903, asthma was compounded by edema. Her body became even heavier. M. Josepha clearly realized that the fluid was seeking a way out of various areas of her body and she stated serenely: "Now the crumbling body is falling apart."



After the painful weeks of suffering, death brought a peaceful expression to her face. “It was as if she had fallen asleep,” noted Fr. auf der Heide in his report to Arnold Janssen.

Sr. Veronika König reported on M. Josepha lying in state: “She was clothed with the habit and laid in the coffin. She had a wreath of green myrtle on her head. The coffin was covered with a large veil of white tulle. Candles and green shrubs were brought in and a little altar arranged, much to the edification of all the sisters. After her death, Reverend Mother’s facial expression was peaceful.”

M. Theresia wrote to Arnold Janssen: “In the coffin ... [she] looked so peacefully natural and gentle... Fr. auf der Heide allowed us to take photographs of her in the coffin.”

M. Josepha’s earthly life had come to an end; yet that was not and still is not the end. The two following statements illustrate that:

“She has departed from this earth but in heaven she lives on. There she will continue to pray for us as Mother of her spiritual daughters,” M. Theresia wrote to Arnold Janssen.

“Her mother-love will live on in the other world,” wrote Sr. Veronika König in her report of the illness and death of M. Josepha.

Idealized Portrait

From the beginning both our co-foundresses, M. Maria, Helena Stollenwerk and M. Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns, were greatly revered and soon regarded as saints. In their families and home villages their memories remain alive. To make them known to a broader public, a biography was published by Sr. Assumpta Volpert in 1920. In addition, prayer leaflets with their portraits, a short biography and some of their sayings were already printed in 1921.

In those days the biographies of saintly persons were given idealized features. That was carried over to the photos, as well. The natural, very expressive features of M. Maria and M. Josepha were touched up and stylized.

These touched up photos appeared in the biography written by Sr. Assumpta, on the prayer leaflets, in the short biographies published in the 1950s and in informative literature published around 1980.



In the 1950s a prayer leaflet was published with a simple charcoal sketch of M. Josepha that clearly shows the stylized idealization.



*„Gott,
Heiliger Geist,
deiner Liebe
und Verherrlichung
weihe ich
mein ganzes Leben.“*

M. Josefa

The mandate of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to religious orders to study their original sources was also applied to the portraits of our co-foundresses. In Steyl Sr. Annemarie Reisch, provincial superior at that time, ensured that the original photos of M. Maria and M. Josepha were copied, reintroduced and distributed. Various prayer leaflets appeared with the genuine photos.

The Language of Symbols

Alongside the photos, M. Josepha's profession cross and ring speak of her consecration to God. The rosary is an expression of her profound union with God and her worldwide prayer. The signs of wear and tear testify to her daily lived fidelity.



Diverse Portrayals, Portraits and Paintings

Sisters with artistic talent or commissioned artists have often attempted to paint portraits of M. Maria and M. Josepha, based on the available photos. Good paintings, portraits or other forms of portrayal are never intended to be a simple reproduction of photos. Rather, they aim to express specific characteristics of the person in question through the type of representation chosen.

A unique representation in the Motherhouse in Steyl is a large tapestry, designed in 1972 by Sr. Hiltruda Stegmann and worked by Sr. Magdalena Schu and Sr. Maria Socorro del Amo.

It expresses the purpose and goal of missionary life and service: The Triune God and the mandate and service that lead to HIM. The three persons depicted are committed to serve God and his honour as the first in the family of Steyl: Arnold Janssen and the two co-foundresses. M. Josepha is at the centre, M. Maria, as a cloistered sister, kneels in front of her; the Missionary Sisters' Motherhouse is in the background; on the left is Arnold Janssen; behind him the ocean and a palm tree. The symbol of the Triune God fills the entire space between the palm tree and the Motherhouse tower.

There is movement in the representation. It points to the mandate: May the Holy Triune God live in our hearts and in the hearts of all people. The lower edge of the symbol of the Trinity is open towards humanity: God turns to his people. Each of the three persons lived the motto in their own manner. M. Josepha, almost always named in third place in the history of the religious family of Steyl – after Arnold Janssen and M. Maria – is in the centre here. She is moving, stepping forward with outstretched hands. She is a woman of relationships: guiding, accompanying, approaching others, giving herself totally. The hands are large: M. Josepha worked hard, accomplished much, prayed very much. Her large, outstretched, open hands are a symbol of her great openness towards God and all people.



In 1982 Sr. Annemarie commissioned the artist husband and wife team Mannhart in Heidelberg to paint a portrait of each of the co-foundresses. In the case of M. Josepha, it was above all her kindness, warmth and sincere friendliness that were to become apparent.



A warm and radiant light plays around the face. If we look at it for any length of time, the feeling arises that M. Josepha is almost about to give us some friendly words of encouragement.

That impression grows stronger when we look at the close up of the picture. Memoirs of the sisters state: “Her whole being was clothed in gentle friendliness and that made her very attractive. Her friendliness and kindness attracted us so, that we immediately felt at home with her. Her friendly look was enough to do you good and cheer you up. If you spoke to her about any troubles you had, you left her feeling reinvigorated.”

Two years later, in 1984, the Mannharts completed another painting: M. Josepha against a background of socio-pastoral activities of sisters today. M. Josepha's expression is pensive, a little serious, gazing past the observer. In her hands she is holding the Rule book. It says: Her life and her teachings are still important for us today. She is present in a caring, intercessory function for those entrusted to her.



M. Josepha (like Arnold Janssen and M. Maria Stollenwerk) had a special love for the pilgrimage shrine of Kevelaer in the Lower Rhineland. She made a regular pilgrimage to “Mary, Consoler of the Afflicted”. In her last letters to her brothers, January 1903, she asked: “Greet the Blessed Mother in Kevelaer for me. I used to love to pray there. She gained many graces for me. – I have always had great confidence in her.” M. Josepha felt that her earthly pilgrimage was coming to an end; that is why several times she urgently asked her brothers and sister to go to Kevelaer in her place and to pray for her. –

This inner closeness to Kevelaer gained external expression in the so-called Door of the Following of Christ in the Basilica of Our Lady in Kevelaer. In 1990 the Basilica gained this new, large Bronze Door with numerous bas-reliefs; it commemorates the visit of M. Teresa of Calcutta to the shrine in 1987.



Among the different personalities shown there who either lived the following of Christ themselves or guided others along that path, the two co-foundress of Steyl can be clearly recognised. They are in a line with M. Teresa, Edith Stein and Hedwig Dransfeld, all of whom worked especially for the poor and for the rights and dignity of women.

This door is an impressive testimony to the fact that little M. Josepha from neighbouring Issum counts among the most significant witnesses to the faith, who dedicated themselves to charitable and social ministry in the following of Christ, enabling women to collaborate in proclaiming the faith.



Inside Kevelaer's Basilica of Our Lady, M. Josepha has also been given a place of honour. Above the pointed arch in the centre aisle there are medallions (round, stained glass pictures as in the Sainte-

Chapelle in Paris); they recall men and women who are significant for our times. In the last roundel, on the left in front of the organ loft, a representation of M. Josepha has been in place since 1999.



From the gold-blue background (colours of God and of eternal glory) her large eyes look down on the one contemplating her. On the right is a radiant circle with the name JESUS CHRISTUS, on the left, faces of people from all over the world. In the strength of the following of Christ she became, and still is, a helper and mother for countless people.

The location is noteworthy: it was the last, free roundel, the last place for M. Josepha! In her letter to Arnold Janssen requesting admission, she expressed the wish, “to be the least and to offer [herself] as a sacrifice for the work of spreading the faith”; and here she has been given a place of honour. This last place in the Basilica of Kevelaer is special: next to her is a portrait of the Belgian King Baudouin who died in 1993, opposite is a representation of the well-known French European politician Robert Schuman. These two statesmen made history through their political service and Christian life witness.

M. Josepha also made history as a model for socially committed women in her home village, as the co-foundress of a large Congregation of Missionary Sisters, and as an example of convincingly lived “ora et labora”.

All the persons represented in the Basilica show that they are pilgrims and they point to what can be read on the organ loft: “Soli Deo Gloria” (to God alone the glory).

In St. Nicholas parish church in Issum, where M. Josepha was baptised, there is a simple memorial plaque, placed there in May 2003 on the occasion of her 100th death anniversary.



It bears M. Josepha's portrait, her baptismal name round the top edge and, around the bottom edge, words from her first letter to Arnold Janssen: "With your grace, to be the least." The modest ceramic plate is very appropriate for these few words that can be regarded as her life's motto, the motto she truly fulfilled in her life: to be the servant of all.



Issum has yet another memorial to M. Josepha. First the courtyard between church and parish house was named Hendrina Stenmanns Court in 2003. The courtyard is a place of encounter for people interested in the history of the activities of this notable citizen of Issum. Since 2006, a large boulder with a portrait of M. Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns etched on it, has graced the centre of the renovated courtyard.

The renovation of the courtyard and the gift of the boulder came about thanks to the members of Issum's St. Nicholas Fraternity, volunteers and sponsors. They follow a good tradition: During her lifetime, Hendrina Stenmanns dedicated her time, energy and scant means to the sick and the poor in Issum.



The enormous, heavy stone is a profoundly expressive symbol for this simple woman: it recalls Hendrina Stenmann's closeness to her home town, her solid character and especially her strong, firm faith and unshakable trust in God's guidance.

In 1996 a portrait of M. Josepha was done, similar to the one made for the beatification of M. Maria. It was painted by the artist Gabriele Saleri in Brescia. The figure of M. Josepha stands tall in the foreground, in her right hand the rosary, characteristic of her as a great woman of prayer. In her left hand, as co-foundress of the Sisters of Steyl, she holds the book of the order's Constitutions. In accordance with the directives

of the Founder, Arnold Janssen, and following this Rule, she introduced the young women, who came to Steyl to become missionary sisters, to the religious life. M. Josepha regards the observer with an unreservedly kind expression.



Behind M. Josepha, on the right, her parental home in Issum is visible. This is where, as eldest daughter, she cared for the large family. It is the house where her loom stood, where for 18 years she wove umbrella silk for the factories in Krefeld. From here she went out to the poor, the sick and the dying, helped them lovingly and prayed with them, thus becoming “the great benefactress of her home village”, as the bronze plaque on her parental home states.



A distinctive element for M. Josepha is the Kevelaer shrine which she often visited. Further away in the background is a typical landmark of her home village, Issum, also typical of the Lower Rhineland and the Netherlands, namely a windmill

M. Josepha had seen sisters leave not only for Argentina, but also for Africa and New Guinea; that explains the palm beach and the round huts on the left of the painting. M. Josepha is standing on the pathway; she is at the same time not only a link between her European home and overseas cultures but also a companion on the way for all who believe and love and who trust in her intercession.

Consummation

Lastly there is a rather unusual image to introduce: An icon of M. Josepha. It was painted in 2002 by Karl A. Selig.

M. Josepha as an icon? For some that might sound strange and unaccustomed at first.



A word about icons in general can help us understand:

■ Icon painting is subject to specific norms and forms that give rise to the severe looking lines. An icon is essentially more than a mere image. The deeper purpose of icons is to make the holy present. They are a proclamation, the expression of an attitude of faith, a visible prayer and archetypes of love. Icons convey the presence of the world hereafter and, therefore, are called “windows on eternity”. The portrayal of the Holy One or of a saint means to make God present, who is the origin of all holiness.

■ When we contemplate an icon, an encounter takes place: the doors open on to the spiritual reality that in faith we call “the new heaven and the new earth”. We can sense something of the incomparable glory that God wishes to gift us with and that he already shows us in his saints.

One who is raised to the honours of the altar is placed above the general human state. A picture of the face taken while the person is alive cannot yet show the features that will only come in eternal life. The presence of the saint, her being, can only be experienced spiritually and can, therefore, only be expressed by spiritual means if the outer appearance is not to be lacking in intensity. In the visible sphere that is the task of art and it is, at the same time, an act of veneration.

Concerning the icon of M. Josepha, we can say: she comes towards us from the golden background of God’s love and glory. The halo reaches up over the frame, telling us that those who make their home in God exceed all boundaries. The inscription bears her names “Hendrina” and “Josepha”. God spoke to her at her baptism and drew her into his love. Hendrina responded to his call to follow and received the religious name “Josepha”. The numerous folds in her cloak and veil symbolize the movement of the Holy Spirit. Under his guidance she consecrated her life to love and glorify God in service to others. She can take us with her on our path of glorifying God.

Conclusion

This selection of pictures shows that, for over a century, modest Hendrina Stenmanns, who preferred the background, constantly and repeatedly interested and fascinated many different persons. Already during her lifetime people felt drawn to her by her uncomplicated, kind-hearted manner. To those who met her, she was unforgettable. If we allow her image to speak to us, be it a photo, painting or other portrayal, we can still encounter Hendrina Stenmanns, M. Josepha, today. Her friendly countenance smiles at us encouragingly:

- “Stay cheerful, be of good heart and never lose your trust; then God will help.” –
- “Let us strive to accomplish everything with love and through love; then the Holy Spirit will give his blessing on it.” –
- “God’s goodness knows no limits.” –
- “Trusting prayer obtains all from God; for a prayerful person is all-powerful with God.”

St. Paul’s words, referring to Jesus Christ: “The grace of God has appeared”, can be read in M. Josepha’s face: she lived God’s goodness among the people and still wants to pass it on and share it with us today.

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Ich bringe Sie in die Forderung des
Glaubens, damit der liebe Gott mich dahin
führen, wofür ich mich zu führen noch fähig
sein beschaffen hat. Aber, der Gedanke, daß
ich in Missionsreisen eintraten soll, warhast
mich nicht. Ich bitte um eine Gefährdung
gibt, mich als Mitglied in der Mission
Ich verlange mich nicht, als mit der Gnade
Gottes die Gerechtigkeit zu sein und mich für die
Macht der Glaubens-Verkündigung zum Opfer
zu bringen. Ich will mich in Gottes Forderung
willen ergeben und mich Ihrer Meinung
ganz überlassen. Wenn der liebe Gott mich
fürs Leben bestimmt hat, werde ich mich
wohl dazu kommen. Der Herr werde ich
führen und es werde mir mich nicht möglich
daß ich eine irgendeine Aufgabe machen
kann, weil ich der Herrscher, weil
ich meine lieben Mitarbeiter und den